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THE PROBLEM OF CHILD IDLENESS.

BY THOMAS SPEED MOSBY, PARDON ATTORNEY OF MISSOURI.

THE solution of the child-labor problem, which, in view of the unanimity of public opinion upon the subject, may be regarded as practically assured, leaves still looming ominously beyond it the portentous problem of child idleness. Statistical information with regard to child-labor is abundantly at hand, and we know exactly the number of children employed in the factories of every State, their hours and their wages. But as to the number of children reared in idleness, we have, unfortunately, no other or better guides than the records of the reformatories and penitentiaries afford us.

These records indicate that the age of greatest criminality is somewhere between the ages of twenty and twenty-five, and that from sixty to seventy per cent. of felons are entirely unskilled in any trade or profession. The United States Census of 1890 showed that, of 52,894 convicts, 31,426 were ignorant of any kind of trade. French statistics covering a period of over fifty years reveal the following number of indictments per 100,000 of each of the classes named: Agriculture, 8; liberal professions and proprietors, 9; factory laborers, 14; commerce, 18; domestic service, 29; without regular trade or occupation, 405.

In the reformatories, where the prisoner by reason of his youth has had less time in which to acquire a trade, the percentage of the unskilled is necessarily much greater than in the penitentiaries. The writer had occasion to discuss this subject with the superintendent of an institution of this kind, which has upon its records the names of 3,154 boys whom it has received during a period of several years. The ages of the boys, at the periods of reception and discharge, ranged between ten and twenty-one years, thus covering the entire period between childhood and manhood.

"How many of these boys had ever been apprenticed before reaching your institution?" the superintendent was asked.

"None," was the reply.

"How many had knowledge of a trade?"

To the last question the very prompt and positive answer was this:

"Absolutely none; if they had, they would never have come here."

In the reformatory to which reference is here made every boy is taught a trade, and it is very seldom that one of them is again heard of as a violator of the laws.

In the largest penitentiary in the United States, where more than two thousand convicts are constantly confined, about sixty-five per cent. are without knowledge of any occupation when received. In some penitentiaries, the percentage is even greater. In this prison the factory system prevails, all are taught some trade, and only about fourteen per cent. ever return to crime.

All investigations in this country show, beyond question, that the American criminal is not a product of the trades, of the workshop or the factory. Although no trade or profession is immune from crime, we here find it at the minimum. And this is true of both sexes. The feminine delinquents are not recruited from the ranks of the factory girls. As a rule, they are women who do not care for work.

"Just as the twig is bent the tree's inclined." The child-idler is simply the adult-idler in the making. And, as Archbishop Tillotson quaintly said: "Idleness and luxury bring forth poverty and want; and this tempts men to injustice and that causeth enmity and animosity." The boy who is allowed to grow up unskilled in any occupation is the boy who is most likely to lapse into the state of mental, spiritual and physical stagnation which the author of the "*Anatomy of Melancholy*" has aptly characterized as "the nurse of naughtiness, the chief author of mischief, one of the seven deadly sins, the cushion upon which the devil chiefly reposes, and a great cause not only of melancholy, but of many other diseases"—and, he might well have said, of crime.

As has been shown, the age of greatest criminality follows immediately upon the age of legal maturity, and the class of greatest criminality is the non-working class. Bring a child to maturity without knowledge of useful work, and you place him in a class

which statistics show is the most likely to commit crime, and at the age when most crimes are committed—thus assuring a kind of double probability of moral delinquency and industrial failure. Contrast such a case with that of the boy who has learned to make an honest living. Whether he be shoe-cutter, machinist, electrician, brass-moulder or what not, in all human probability he will continue to ply his trade. He will feel some sense of responsibility to his work. His mind will be occupied by the duties of his calling, and he will pass by the idle and the dissipated at a time when, as experience has shown, the human mind is most susceptible to the influences that make for crime. Nor is this a mere supposition. It is a fact verified by the prison records.

If the habits formed in youth may be regarded as in any sense an index or forecast of the character of the adult, then, in the light of the criminal statistics, the problem of child idleness may justly lay claim to some measure of the dignity and importance so freely accorded to the much-mooted problem of child-labor; and before making it impossible for the youth to acquire practical (as well as theoretical) knowledge of gainful pursuits, we should reckon the latent dangers that lurk within the possibilities of a generation brought up without effective knowledge of useful work.

To be sure, it by no means follows that, in teaching the child to work, his powers should be taxed beyond their capacity. To do so is inhuman in the extreme. The labor of the child should not proceed beyond the limits of healthful exertion; and the primary consideration, at all times, should be an educational and not a financial one. He should by no means be taught that the only object of labor is to earn money; but he should be made to understand his obligation to serve, inasmuch as he is served; to give, as he receives; to bring to the world, as he takes from it—and he should be taught the means of performing that obligation. With such an education he will be both able and willing to fashion with hand or brain, and he will go forth to his duties, feeling, not that the world owes him a living, but that he owes to the world a life.

THOMAS SPEED MOSBY.